

Student with Asperger's thrives at The Winston School

When Jasmine Smith first visited The Winston School at the end of 7th grade, she didn't realize she could even like school, let alone love it. Struggling with Asperger's and shunned by fellow students in her middle school, she never envisioned having friends, working on school plays, or going to the prom. Five years later, she's graduating from Winston and heading to college having experienced all of these simple life pleasures — including the love of learning.



Jasmine Smith at her prom

"After my bad experiences in middle school, I hated any type of school, any social gatherings. I was afraid of rejection and back-

stabbing." She said that all changed when she started at Winston. "It's a smaller community and it took me a little bit to get used to it — there were more teachers that were inclined to help individuals. They let me see that I can actually do some of the stuff I never thought I could."

The idea to attend Winston originally came from a doctor who offered her a selection of possible school choices. "Winston was the first school I visited and I was like 'wow this is really an awesome school,'" she said. "I liked the fact the classes were small and could focus on what the teacher was saying. If I had a question I could ask it and 30 other hands wouldn't be in the air. It's easier to understand hard content."

"Since I have Asperger's, sometimes things don't make it home into my brain. I'm able to take notes in classes and not be distracted by people passing notes and texting. I notice a lot of things but at Winston, the teacher was the only person to focus on

making it much easier."

Compounding the academic challenges, Jasmine said the larger public school environment also posed problems socially. "At my old school it was way too difficult to jump from one group to another group. Say you want to hang out with people who play video games but you can't jump groups because you commit social suicide. It was very hard to keep them in order with their faces — it felt like chaos. Being packed like sardines and being the only one who doesn't get what's going on — that's my analogy."

Jasmine said Winston's individualized approach and small class sizes made a big difference from her first day at the school when teacher Matt Curreri gave her a note recognizing an accomplishment. "I can't remember what it said, but I remember thinking that I was really happy for being noticed for something that I had done. Here they notice you did something good and you rose above average to meet a challenge that other people tried but didn't succeed. I was really happy — it kind of got me hooked."

An outgoing, confident and articulate girl, it's hard to believe Jasmine was ever shy or an under-achiever. She proudly talks about being selected as a student panelist for two of The Winston School Conversation presentations and was honored to have been selected to address the school's board of directors with two other students. She said she also earned recognition and skills by participating in the Winston workability program making lunch pizzas at The Winston Corner commissary.

As she prepares to leave for Monterey Bay State in the fall, she said she hopes others students that are struggling with school have the same opportunity she did to change the course of her life. "I like that the Sweetwater District was able to pay and send me an hour away to come here. Now that there are money issues with the economy, the schools aren't sending as many students to good schools. I think that's crazy — if someone needs a good education this school is a total guarantee you're going to learn a lot."

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